

Vision 2020

A Strategic Plan For Michigan State Parks

1992



Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks
Michigan Department of Natural Resources
Parks and Recreation Division

Report Summary

This report presents recommendations made by the Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks to address the critical issues facing the Michigan State Parks System. These recommendations resulted from a two-year process involving hundreds of citizens representing diverse interests, planning sessions, task force reports, and public meetings. Six major issue areas were identified by these groups, and the Citizens Committee endorses the following strategies for action:

- **Build a long-term stable financial base:**

Secure a permanent endowment for Michigan State Parks through a one-cent sales tax increase for one year. Explore other non-traditional sources of funding for the system.

- **Provide interpretive programs in the parks:**

Establish interpretive programs as a cornerstone for the activities provided in the parks system.

- **Improve and expand camping and lodging facilities:**

Upgrade existing camping and lodging facilities and work in partnership with the private sector to create new overnight accommodations.

- **Improve and expand recreational opportunities:**

Provide the facilities and information needed by the public to enjoy a range of activities throughout the parks system, and encourage new visitors to enjoy the parks' resources.

- **Establish new programs for resource stewardship and park evaluation, and improve the park planning process:**

Initiate inventory and management programs that help protect sensitive historic and natural resources in the parks.

Improve the park planning process through better use of resource information and public participation. Adopt criteria that can be used to evaluate individual parks, or to guide future park acquisitions.

- **Create a marketing program:**

Develop a marketing program for the state parks system that would give the public more information about the opportunities available in the system, and provide park managers with information to guide future decisions on park facilities, activities and programs.

The Michigan State Parks System in Crisis

The Michigan State Parks System was established to protect--for all Michigan citizens, present and future--the outstanding natural, historic and recreation resources in the state. The parks system now has 96 units, making available to the public a wide range of outdoor experiences. Averaging 25 million visitors a year, the system is a key component of tourism--Michigan's second largest industry--and the scenic and historic features preserved in the state parks are often used to attract visitors from other states.

In spite of the great popular support that is consistently shown for state parks, funding for the parks system through the state general fund has decreased dramatically over the past decade, from providing over 70 percent of the parks' budget in 1980 to only 20 percent in 1992. Even though Michigan has one of the largest and most heavily visited state parks system in the country, 40 other states now provide more support for their park systems than we do in Michigan.

To survive this tremendous decrease in general fund support park management has been forced to turn to increasingly high camping and user fees, and severe cost cutting measures, including seasonal closure of parks and a reduction of almost one-third of the staff since 1980.

This has brought the Michigan State Parks System to a point of great vulnerability, putting in jeopardy the special resources the system was designed to protect.

The lack of a stable financial base affects all other aspects of park management. Interpretive programs of great importance not only to the education of young Michigan residents, but also in encouraging tourism were slashed, management of the sensitive natural and historic resources is haphazard, and campgrounds now receive only minimal care.

Vision 2020: Offering Solutions

In 1990, the precarious situation for the state parks system led the Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks to initiate a process to identify the most pressing concerns for the system and to recommend a course of action to address these issues. This "Vision 2020" process has taken more than two years and the time and talent of hundreds of citizens representing diverse interests from around the state.

This document summarizes the results of the Vision 2020 process. One of the first steps taken by the participants was to clearly describe a shared vision of the Michigan State Parks System for the future. This vision can be stated as follows:

In the year 2020:

- The Michigan State Parks System is a leader in preserving and protecting Michigan's significant natural and historic resources.
- The system has sufficient and stable funding which allows for adequate staff and quality facilities and services.
- It is a dynamic system anticipating changing needs and user demands while protecting the natural resource traditions that have been the hallmark of the system.
- Barriers for access have been eliminated so that Michigan's citizens and visitors can enjoy the wide variety of natural resources based recreation opportunities provided in the parks.
- Educational opportunities and interpretive services

are emphasized throughout the system to promote enjoyment and stewardship of natural and historic resources.

- Michigan State Parks contribution to local economies and state tourism continues to grow and is recognized.
- There is strong public support for the system which is built upon aggressive partnerships with users, host communities, and the private sector.
- It employs a diverse, professional and enthusiastic staff.
- Michigan State Parks are appreciated and valued

by all of Michigan's citizens and its visitors.

If the Michigan State Parks System is to become what is described in this vision for the year 2020, action is needed now to address the problems facing the system.

Six major issue areas were identified by the participants in this process, and many potential solutions to these problems were explored. The Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks urges the adoption of the recommended actions presented in this report. These are actions that will ensure that the parks natural, historic and recreation resources will be enjoyed by generations to come. These are actions that can be taken to return to Michigan the distinction of having one of the best state parks system in the nation.

The Citizens Committee For Michigan State Parks

The thirteen member committee:

- was created in 1989 to guide the planning, development, and management of state parks.
- is leading Vision 2020, the strategic management process for state parks and has chaired each of five committees which has provided recommendations contained within this report.
- membership reflects park users, local government officials, recreation providers, the tourism community and natural resource managers who all share a love for parks and a commitment to renew the excellence once the hallmark of the system.

Long-Term Funding For State Parks

Michigan State Parks were purchased by and for all our citizens and represent the finest examples of natural and historic sites in our state--and some of the best outdoor recreation features in the nation. Whether purchased or gifted, it was intended that they would be preserved and made available for all our citizens. Parks enhance the quality of life for all our citizens. They also provide an opportunity for educating the public, particularly our children, on the history of our state and the importance of our natural resources--both in our past and for the future. State parks are also vital to the tourist economy in our state.

The Michigan State Parks System is in dire trouble. One of the largest state park systems in the country, it ranks near the top in land, facilities, campsites, camping days and total visitors. Historically, Michigan has supported its parks system with general revenue funds for both capital expenditures for lands and facilities, and for its annual operating costs.

In the last decade, general fund support for the annual operating program has gone from over 75 percent to 20 percent. User fees comprise 80 percent of parks budget in the form of annual and daily vehicle permits, camping fees and concession revenue. General fund, once available for capital improvements and maintenance of existing roads; sewers; electrical systems; and remodeling, has disappeared.

The result of this trend has been a significant decrease in the number and quality of park services. Since 1980, we have lost one-third of our permanent staff--both full and part-time. Park use hours have been reduced and many parks are

now open only during the summer months.

If the present trend continues the structure and operation of the entire Michigan State Parks System must be directed toward management of those facilities that have the opportunity to increase revenue through higher user fees, and closing those which offer little hope of making money. Unfortunately, such a redirection would increase the focus of state parks toward serving the more affluent, further discouraging use of this valuable public resource by lower-income groups.

It is possible to run a state park system strictly on user fees. The question is not whether it can be run entirely on user fees but whether or not it should be as a matter of public policy.

A state park system managed strictly on user fees will be a very different system than what is appreciated by Michigan's citizens and tourists today. Natural resource trea-

sures such as Tahquamenon Falls or Porcupine Mountains do not generate enough revenue to meet their operating costs. Historic treasures such as Fort Wilkins or Fayette face the same problems. Each of these facilities has relied on general fund support to continue operation.

A long-term funding source is critical to insure continued viability of the state parks system. This funding source should provide sufficient revenues to ensure that parks are adequately staffed and the resources are protected and interpreted. The funding source must both be protected from diversion by the Legislature and remain stable in times of economic difficulty. Many options were explored: charging a 4 percent tax on the sale of pop and restricting that money to parks, increasing the cost of real estate transactions, adding a surcharge on license plates, or charging a 4 percent tax on entertainment activities.

Long-Term Funding For State Parks Recommendation

To have a quality state park system, a long-term, stable source of funding needs to be found. After studying various possible sources, the Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks recommends that the sales tax be increased from 4 percent to 5 percent for one year. The money raised would be placed into a constitutionally protected endowment fund and dedicated to operating, maintaining and improving the state parks system. The endowment fund shall be a permanent fund where principal cannot be used. Entrance fees, as well as fees for services, such as camping, would continue to be charged.

Interpretive Programs

The finest examples of Michigan's natural and cultural resources are preserved within our state parks. These resources, which the parks system was created to preserve, are affected by the millions of visitors who use the parks each year. Significant degradation of the park resources can occur simply through use which fails to take into account the fragile, and often irreplaceable character of these features. As any feature is degraded or lost, the quality of the park for future users is diminished. Therefore, if we are to provide for the future enjoyment of the parks, we need to instill a sense of understanding and appreciation for the unique features of each park in the minds of current visitors.

Most visitors come to the parks for the recreation resources they provide. For many visitors, enjoyment of the parks is enhanced by the opportunity to learn about the structure and function, as well as the historic and present-day significance of park features. Since the Parks Division is mandated to provide for the enjoyment of park resources, interpretive programs which offer insight into the histories of significant natural and historic features provide an important means of enhancing the recreation value of the parks.

Each park also presents a window on the regional ecosystem complex in which it is found. Through this window, visitors can be helped to recognize important features of the natural environment and the evidences of human history so often embedded in it. Building an appreciation of natural and historic features within the parks should translate into

increased sensitivity to the larger environment with its fascinating complexities and contemporary problems.

A well-designed interpretive program in Michigan's State Parks will make visitors more aware of the wonders of the parks, of the larger environment of which the parks are a com-

ponent, and of the human-related problems facing the environment—both within and outside of the parks. They should also become more enlightened citizens and more sensitive users of the parks, forests and wildlife resources of this state.

Interpretive Programs Recommendations

- Interpretive programs must be viewed as an essential component of the Michigan State Park System; therefore, all Michigan State Parks shall provide interpretive services to educate visitors about the resources of the park and to minimize visitor impact on the resources.
- All interpretive programs shall include the broad concepts of the natural world, humans as part of the natural world, and their responsibilities for the long-range protection of Michigan's resources.
- Interpreters should be available at all major parks, and seasonal interpreters at all other parks, to assist visitors in the enjoyment and understanding of the resources and to minimize visitor impact on the resources.
- Interpretive opportunities should be a factor in all future park acquisitions.
- The following criteria should be used in determining the level of interpretive service to be provided at a park:
 - significance of the park's natural or historic resources.
 - availability and types of similar resources found within the system.

Lodging and Camping

Michigan State Parks provide overnight accommodations primarily through an extensive campground system. The system offers over 14,000 campsites. Most feature electric hook-ups and modern toilet facilities with showers. In addition, the system has 85 rustic cabins available to rent. The cabins vary in size with capacity ranging from four to 24 persons and are furnished with single or bunk beds, wood stoves, and tables. Visitors are expected to bring bedding, cookware, lanterns and a stove for cooking.

Campers have played a critical role in financing the system. Approximately 50 percent of the parks' budget is derived from campers. Yet in the last 15 years, we have lost over 1 million campers.

This loss of camping nights can be attributed to several factors:

- There is increased competition from the private sector and local recreation providers.
- The elderly, single parents, people with disabilities, working couples, and urban residents are not participating in camping and these groups make up a large portion of Michigan's population.

The policy, adopted by the Natural Resources Commission in 1954, prohibited other lodging options from being developed in state parks; but significant changes have occurred in the makeup of Michigan's citizens and their recreational choices. The parks system must be given the opportunity to respond to these changes. An overnight experience should be available to Michigan citizens and visitors whether or not they camp.

Lodging and Camping Recommendations

- In order to provide opportunities for use by a greater diversity of Michigan's citizens and to enhance tourism, the camping experience shall be improved and a wider variety of overnight accommodations should be provided, Parks Division shall continuously explore, monitor and analyze changing user demands for lodging and camping and provide facilities and services to meet these demands.
- The mix of lodging and camping options must be considered on a park-by-park basis to determine which options most effectively meet changing user demands and enhance the opportunity to enjoy and protect the natural, recreation, or historic experience of the park. An appropriate market analysis, based upon the scope of the project, shall be conducted on any new lodging option. When considering new lodging opportunities Parks Division shall consult with tourism organizations and private and public lodging providers in the area.
- Except for camping and rustic lodging facilities, the private sector shall be given the first option for management and/or construction of new lodging opportunities with guidelines, oversight and approval by the Natural Resources Commission.
- In order to facilitate effective communication with other lodging providers, a lodging subcommittee of the Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks should be created, comprised of members of the committee and the private sector. The subcommittee shall examine lodging issues and needs from a statewide perspective.

Recreation Opportunities

Michigan State Parks entertain millions of visitors each year. The incredible natural and historic resources found within the parks provide a playground for young and old alike.

While the system is rich in land and water resources, it is lacking in opportunities to experience the vast wealth of the land.

Just as people are seeking additional lodging opportunities, there is a significant demand for expanding opportunities to recreate within the parks. The Michigan State Parks System has tended to provide the same activities throughout the system. Activities help provide separate identities for each park and assist in moving visitors around the system as they explore the new opportunities.

The few events currently offered in parks are heavily attended and more have been encouraged by area tourist organizations. Events such as concerts, mystery nights, or festivals, provide an opportunity to introduce visitors to Michigan State Parks and to encourage them to return for activities, interpretive services or to enjoy the scenic, recreation, natural or historic resources found within the park. Events are an excellent way to encourage those who have not traditionally used state parks to experience the system. Events often have a positive economic impact on the surrounding area.

While the system needs to provide additional recreation opportunities, it must also insure that there is a quality infrastructure to facilitate visitor use.

If the Michigan State Parks System is to remain in a position of national prominence and meet the needs of the citizens of this state, the system must

change. The development of additional services, activities and events is critical to maintaining current users and attract new users to the parks system.

Recreation Opportunities Recommendations

- Activities, those opportunities which are provided on a sustained basis, shall be encouraged which provide improved and additional opportunities for state park users to enjoy the historic, natural and recreation resources of the park. Activities should have a market feasibility study conducted appropriate to the scope of the project. Activities should complement the character of the park. Activities should not duplicate local recreation facilities and programs.
- Special events, those opportunities which are provided on a temporary basis, especially those which enhance the enjoyment of the park resources, are strongly encouraged. Events which will damage the historic or significant natural resources of the park or threaten public safety shall not be allowed. Partnerships for organizing and sponsoring the event should be encouraged.
- New facilities which provide opportunities for the visitor to enjoy their stay in the park should be explored and provided where feasible. The provision of facilities should reflect changing user demands. These facilities should be compatible with the resources and the theme of the park and minimize duplication with facilities being provided in the area surrounding the park.
- While new activities, special events and facilities are important to improving the state parks system, it is equally as important to insure that the existing infrastructure is improved and meets the highest standard of quality.
- Hunting and fishing are important activities currently being provided by the Michigan State Parks System and should be continued.

Resource Stewardship, Park Planning and Evaluation

The history of Michigan is the coming together of diverse groups of people in a place blessed with a unique blend of natural resources, especially on the vast shoreline of the Great Lakes. Michigan State Parks hold in trust for future generations many of these irreplaceable natural resources and significant remnants of our shared history. These riches enhance the quality of life for Michigan residents and attract millions of visitors to our state each year.

In the park setting, people learn how their predecessors shaped the landscape and, in turn, had their lives shaped by the natural world around them. The preservation and interpretation of historic and natural resources in the state parks is an important part of the state's responsibility for the education of its citizens--both young and old.

Ecologically, Michigan is a remarkably diverse state. The landscape includes a continuum of natural communities, from those with southern affinities in the lower part of the state, to those of distinct boreal character in the north. The shoreline of the Great Lakes, which features the world's most extensive sand dunes ecosystem, contributes significantly to this ecological diversity. These resources make Michigan an important part of the global biosphere.

The state parks system--as a network of naturally and historically important sites--plays a central and vital role in the conservation of this biodiversity.

In its mission, the Michigan State Parks System is charged to "acquire, maintain, and make available for the use of the public, open spaces for recreation or for the preservation of natural beauty or natural features possessing historic

information or association...to preserve the scenery, the natural and historic features, and the wildlife found thereon and to provide for the enjoyment of these features and aspects by the public in such a way as to assure preservation for the enjoyment of future generations".

Unfortunately, the development of the state parks system has not been guided by consistent goals or adherence to objective criteria. Given the severe fiscal constraints facing the system, adopting objective guidelines could be important in acquiring or transferring of individual park units, and in evaluating how each contributes to the system as a whole.

To accurately evaluate the park system in this way requires a knowledge of the system's assets--special natural and historic resources that distinguish the parks. This information is also needed to optimally manage and develop park units. A comprehensive survey of the system's historic

and natural resources would provide a factual basis for park planning, management and evaluation. It would be equally useful in developing a marketing program for the parks system.

Management of the parks special resources would be improved by adopting a clear resource management policy. In addition, park managers need assistance if they are to ensure that sensitive historic and natural resources are managed appropriately.

Master plans for parks play a significant role in directing the future use and management of natural and historic resources. Plans would be greatly improved if they clearly identify a special focus for each park, based on the resources of the park and the reasons for its acquisition. In this way the Michigan State Parks System will be able to emphasize the unique character of each park, while providing the full range of resources and activities to be enjoyed by park visitors.

Resource Stewardship, Park Planning and Evaluation Recommendations

- The Michigan State Parks System must be recognized as a dynamic system which represents quality natural, historic, and recreation resources. The properties in the system should be evaluated in three basic areas with the following weights: natural or historic values (41 per cent), recreation value (34 percent), and operating efficiency (25 percent). These criteria should also be used in the consideration of potential acquisitions.
- If a facility does not meet this standard, the facility should be considered for transfer or other alternatives including techniques for

Recommendations (continued)

alternative management, shorter seasons, etc. New resources and facilities will be needed to insure that the system continues to represent Michigan's quality natural, historic and recreation resource. The funds derived from any transfer should be allocated to improving the quality of the system.

- Within one year, a plan which defines the system in the year 2020 should be completed. This plan should define the number of facilities within the system; missing natural, historic or recreation resources, which should be acquired for the system; review of park boundaries; and an identification of priority in holdings to complete the system.

Inventory

- An inventory of the system should be completed in consultation with the Michigan Department of State Bureau of History which identifies the primary natural, historic and recreation resources of each park. This inventory should identify the external and internal threats to the system. Prior to earth-moving operations or significant changes to the park's landscape, information on natural and cultural resources should be reviewed to determine if the operation is likely to cause their degradation.

Management

- The Parks Division should adopt the following goals for the stewardship of natural and historic resources;
 - To preserve the natural and historic resources in Michigan State Parks.
 - To balance recreation use of Michigan State Parks with the protection of the historic and natural resources.
 - To restore natural and historic resources that have been degraded.
- The use of natural processes and native species should be emphasized in management programs. Use of exotic species is strongly discouraged, especially in parks that emphasize the natural resource.
- Regional resource management positions should be created to assist park staff in developing and implementing management and inventory programs. They should develop an advisory committee comprised of individuals with expertise about special park resources.

In assessing the significance and management of park resources, the role these resources play in the larger ecosystem should be considered. Plans should take into account the natural integration of resources on both sides of park boundaries, and threats to park resources that may come from outside park boundaries.

Master planning process

- The master plan process should be revised to include the following:
 - The establishment of a natural resource, recreation or historic theme for each park.
 - The identification of zones for intensive recreation, extensive recreation and resource protection.
 - A greater statewide focus in determining the development of the park.
 - Increased involvement by the Natural Resources Commission in determining the policy issues which should be addressed by the planning process.
 - An estimate of the costs for development of the park, a timetable for development and a management plan for the special natural and historic resources found in the park.

Marketing

The future success of the Michigan State Parks System will depend on whether it can:

- Innovatively blend and accomplish its stewardship and recreation mission,
- efficiently provide opportunities and services which Michigan residents value and are willing to support,
- generate sufficient and dependable revenues to support both its stewardship and recreational objectives, and
- develop and strengthen relationships and partnerships with different publics.

This will require a more marketing-oriented approach to decisions related to new parks; facilities, services and programs; prices and fee structure and marketing communication.

Marketing Recommendation

- Michigan State Parks shall be marketed consistent with the mission and strategic plan. The purpose of marketing is to support and contribute to the primary mission and objectives of the system by:
 - creating awareness of the support for state parks among different publics,
 - providing a variety of state park opportunities which reflect the needs and desires of a changing and more diverse population,
 - making these state park opportunities accessible,
 - establishing equitable fees and prices,
 - developing alternative sources of revenue which together provide dependable funding, and
 - forming partnerships which support the mission of state parks.